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# A case study of "The Shelter Program for Families in Temporary Housing" at the Children's Museum of Manhattan

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**A Case Study of *The Shelter Program for Families in Temporary Housing* at  
the Children's Museum of Manhattan**

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of  
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Children's Museum of Manhattan

By Leah Taradash

**ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study was to examine the benefits of museum outreach programs, specifically regarding the ways in which such programs contribute to the social, physical, and language development of children. With *The Shelter Program for Families in Temporary Housing* at The Children's Museum of Manhattan as the primary resource, data was gathered through individual interviews with staff and informal observations of the participating children from October 2013 to March 2014. Findings revealed how a museum's commitment to reach out to families in underserved populations positively affects the developmental needs of children, which may be lacking in their current living situation. The program model from this study contributes to the field of museum outreach by providing examples of implementation that produce tangible results in serving the needs of its participants.

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## I: INTRODUCTION

My semester of fieldwork at the American Museum of Natural History's *Science and Nature Program* provided many meaningful teaching opportunities. Leading science inquiry lessons for children as young as three years old not only pushed me out of my comfort zone relative to the subject matter, but also provided me with an understanding of how the Museum's dioramas and artifacts could be used to successfully teach very young children complex topics such as animal adaptations and predator prey relationships. With each new lesson, the children's curiosity and wonderment for the natural world grew as they strengthened their vocabulary by asking questions and making observations.

As rewarding as my experience working with the *Science and Nature Program* was, I could not help but recognize the privilege these children had that allowed them to be exposed to museums and other cultural institutions at an early age. This privilege seemed to be a common trait among museum visitors I have served during my career as a museum educator, a realization that prompted me to contemplate the percentage of individuals whose life circumstances do not grant them these privileges. It appeared that such individuals, as a result of socioeconomic status, either do not have the monetary means to visit a museum or do not take advantage of discounted opportunities because they view museums as an unwelcoming environment. Since museums provide valuable resources that promote learning and educational skills to individuals of all ages, as exhibited by the three-year-old scientists in the *Science and Nature Program*, the lack of access to such cultural resources for at-risk populations is distressing. Due to limited

knowledge of, and exposure to, such resources, many parents are denied opportunities that could strengthen their lives, as well as the lives of their children.

In my quest to investigate ways in which museums could bridge this gap by reaching out to populations that are frequently underserved, I became an AmeriCorps member at Providence Children's Museum, an organization that places museum outreach at the forefront of its mission. During my year of service, my work with children enrolled in the Head Start program exposed me to some of the many positive implications of museum outreach and furthered my drive to find out more about the field. In September 2013, I became an early childhood educator at the Children's Museum of Manhattan's *Shelter Program for Families in Temporary Housing* (herein referred to as the *Shelter Program*), an outreach program that serves single mothers and their children currently living in a New York City homeless shelter. As an educator, I spend the two-hour sessions primarily focused on the children, facilitating enriching activities that promote learning and social development in the Museum's early childhood classroom. My work with the children in the *Shelter Program* will act as the primary resource for this case study, as I investigate the importance of museum outreach programs, specifically in regards to child development.

### **Background of Institutional Setting**

The Children's Museum of Manhattan (CMOM) inspires children and families to learn about themselves and our culturally diverse world through a unique environment of interactive exhibitions and programs. Each year, CMOM serves more than 350,000 people, including 65,000 children who visit the Museum as part of a school group or through one of the Museum's community partners. CMOM is committed to making its

exhibits and programs available to all, and with outreach programs at nearly 50 sites around New York City, they continually reach thousands of families who might not otherwise be able to benefit from the museum's services. CMOM focuses on four priority areas to impact children in ways that will last a lifetime:

- Early childhood education prepares children for success in school
- Creativity in the arts and sciences inspires creative and analytical thinking skills for lifelong learning
- Healthy lifestyles programs provide a blueprint for a family's physical, emotional and environmental well-being
- Exploration of world cultures gives children awareness, understanding and context for the diverse society in which we all live

These priorities are met through exhibitions, classes, workshops, performances and Museum-sponsored festivals. CMOM's programs and exhibits are designed to address the multiple ways children learn and to help parents understand and support their children's development. Professional Development programs are offered to parents, educators and childcare providers and health care professionals as a means to broaden CMOM's influence in reaching children and their families effectively.

### **Description of the *Shelter Program***

As a cornerstone of CMOM's community outreach for nearly two decades, the *Shelter Program* is at the heart of CMOM's mission to provide innovative learning opportunities that promote the healthy growth and development of children and families across New York City each year. CMOM's *Shelter Program* provides children and single mothers living in temporary housing with music, art, literacy, health and parenting skills

in a safe and supportive environment at the Museum. Through an intensive weekly program, the women gain tools and life skills that empower them as mothers and future job seekers, and their children develop valuable literacy and health habits. Through this unique and powerful program, these women and children envision a new future as they overcome the many challenges they face. Their hopes and needs are often guiding lights for new exhibitions and programs, joining other community voices the Museum staff members listen to every week.

The three inter-related goals that form the basis of this program are as follows.

The *Shelter Program* aims to provide participants with access to:

- Enhanced literacy skills/ opportunities
- Positive and developmentally appropriate parenting skills \*\*
- An open and supportive forum external to the City/State/Federal housing system

*\*\* Over the past ten years, CMOM has discovered that 95% of the mothers who participate in the Shelter Program are victims of physical and verbal abuse. This experience with violence, frequently compounded by limited parenting and communication skills, is often transmitted to their children through the use of force or derision. Because of a driving desire to break this cycle, the Shelter Program places a special emphasis on helping participants uncover ways to effectively resolve problems, enact discipline, and engage socially using non-violent means.*

Children in the program are typically under the age of four, as the program takes place during the school day, where school-aged children are in school. Pregnant mothers and mothers with infants are also welcome to attend. The shelter provides transportation to and from the Museum. Educators are purposefully selected based on their expertise in



the field of early childhood education and their work with children from at-risk environments. Given the intensive one-on-one work required, educators are expected to not only have the experience, but also the passion to work in a high-energy setting.

The program's structure follows three core components:

1. **A Parent/Child early childhood session** that leads participants through a series of individual, collective, small, and large group language, literacy, art, music, and movement activities, supporting young mothers as they gain confidence and parenting skills, and preparing their children for pre-school and lifelong learning together.
2. **A parenting “breakout” session** \*\* incorporating the skills and services of both a social worker and a writer-in-residence who help the mothers work through, and creatively express the emotions behind, the tremendous challenges they face daily.
3. **A children’s “breakout” session** in which the children continue to explore the Museum’s PlayWorks classroom under the guidance of the early childhood educators, with the possibility to explore other exhibits throughout the Museum.

*\*\* Given that my work requires me to stay with the children during the duration of each session, this study will strictly focus on events that take place during the parent/child early childhood session and the children’s “breakout” session.*

Both the parent/child early childhood session as well as the children’s “breakout” session take place in the PlayWorks classroom, which is directly adjacent to PlayWorks, the Museum’s early childhood exhibit. The classroom includes two pull-out tables, which are used for the craft during the parent/child session and cleaned at the end of the session with help from the children. During the children’s “breakout” session, these tables are often used for Playdough and puzzles. A pretend kitchen area includes a sink, stove,

oven, and refrigerator, and is fully stocked with pretend fruits, veggies, and Velcro pizza and birthday cake. The book area has classic early childhood books, including *Pete the Cat* and Eric Carle as well as a cradle filled with baby dolls that can be dressed. This area also has puppets and manipulatives such as a shape sorter, hand-held mirrors, and color-changing tubes that can be shaken to mix the colors inside. One of the main attractions of the room is the curly slide, which has stairs to climb and a ball tube allowing children to drop balls down and see them emerge from the other end. Underneath the slide is a chalkboard. The room is also fully stocked with craft supplies and other manipulatives that can be taken out as needed, including drums, shaker eggs, extra toy food, books, and puzzles.

### **Session Schedule:**

The *Shelter Program* runs on a weekly schedule, with sessions offered on Tuesdays over two 12-week terms: one in the fall (October- December) and one in the spring (January-June) in accordance with the New York City Public School system. Sessions last for 2 hours with participants (plus an additional half hour before and after for planning and discussion among staff) and are facilitated by a social worker, a writer-in-residence and four CMOM early childhood educators. The schedule operates according to the following structure:

- Upon entering the PlayWorks classroom, Museum staff greet the children and mothers and sing the welcome song. During the first hour, mothers and children explore the space's offerings as individuals, pairs, or in small groups. They may also choose to participate—together or separately—in a hands-on art activity that can be taken home at the end of the day. Informal conversations between and among the parents and

members of the staff—including museum educators, the social worker, and the writer-in-residence—may occur during this time as well, allowing the parents and staff to answer questions, explore uncertainties, discuss personal issues and challenges, and revisit and revise poetry and writing created during previous sessions.

- Children are led in a group clean up that includes putting away the toys as well as using sponges to clean one of the tables that has been used for the craft. While participating in the group clean up, with songs such as “Clean Up, Clean Up 1, 2, 3” and “It’s Time to Clean Our Table” children learn the importance of cleaning up after themselves.
- After the tables have been put away, the entire group participates in a structured group Circle Time, where an early childhood educator reads a picture book of the day and performs songs and movement activities accompanied by a musical shaker egg.
- Families and staff then transition upstairs to the Creativity Lab for a pizza lunch. As they eat, the mothers can engage in additional informal discussions with one another and the staff . Children can also explore the exhibit structures in the room, such as the mail truck, mail box, and mini market and kitchen area. During this time, the mothers are reminded that they can receive a free CMOM membership and are encouraged to visit the museum on their own at any time.
- For the last forty-five minutes, each constituent group—mothers and children—participate in “breakout” sessions.
- The mothers participate in parenting sessions that include a group “Support Group” with a social worker, and writing exercises with the writer-in-residence.

- The children further explore the classroom with early childhood educators. If older children express an interest in exploring the adjacent exhibit, an educator will accompany them.
- As the parents and children reunite at the end of the session, all participants receive their own age-appropriate picture book—generally, the book that’s been read aloud during that day’s story-time—which they can bring home in order to help build their own personal libraries.

### **Guiding Purpose**

By studying the ways in which the *Shelter Program* at The Children’s Museum of Manhattan benefit the children’s social, physical, and language development, the findings of this case study will contribute to the current literature and program implementation related to museum outreach, specifically regarding ways in which museums can play a significant role in serving families in temporary housing.

## **II: LITERATURE REVIEW**

In 2010, 11 percent of homeless children who spent time in shelters were under the age of one year, 41 percent were between one and five, 31 percent were between six and 12, and 16 percent were between 13 and 17 (Child Trends Data Bank, 2010). Based on this data collected by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, the majority of children in homeless shelters are at the age of early childhood development, a critical stage in a child's life where basic social, emotional, physical, and cognitive skills begin to develop (Barnett & Boocock, 1998). Lack of permanent housing places these children at a significant disadvantage regarding their ability to receive a quality education, resulting in developmental delays that could be detrimental to their future academic achievement (Barnett & Boocock, 1998). Such developmental delays could also place the child at greater risk of emotional and social disorders, delayed motor milestones, and restricted expressive and receptive language abilities (Molnar et al, 1991).

### **Language/ Literacy Development**

One of this year's most discussed studies regarding developmental delays experienced by low-income children at the early childhood age was conducted by psychologists Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley. In 1980 after spending years recording the number of words spoken to children from varying socioeconomic backgrounds, this team of researchers found that:

children of professionals were, on average, exposed to approximately 1,500 more words hourly than children growing up in poverty...which resulted in a gap of more than 32 million words by the time the children reached the age of four (Bellafante, 2012).

This 32 million word gap clearly illustrates the developmental disadvantages children as young as three years old face in their language acquisition and development of literacy skills. The data also emphasizes the correlation between social factors and language development. As evidenced by Hart and Risley's findings, language is primarily obtained through socialization. The more parents and adults talk to children, beginning as young as infancy, the more language the children are able to acquire and the stronger their vocabulary will become. Conversely, if a child is not frequently exposed to words through regular interactions and conversations initiated by adults, that child will have much greater difficulties developing a strong vocabulary. In order to decrease this word deficit, families in under-resourced neighborhoods need to be given literary resources that will provide their youngest children with the tools for language development.

As books are a key resource in a child's exposure to language, access to literature plays a significant role in the socioeconomic literary divide. Unsurprisingly, the population suffering from a word deficit is also the one that cannot afford to buy books to read to their children. In comparison to the approximately 13 books per child found in middle-income neighborhoods, there is about one book for every 300 children in low-income neighborhoods (First Book, 2013). This significant disproportion between the number of books available to middle- and lower- class children highlights a severe lack of essential resources in low-income families that contributes to developmental delays including illiteracy and delayed language acquisition.

### **Social/Emotional Development**

In addition to these language skills, ample social interaction among children and adults promotes social skills such as sharing, expressing needs and wants, and problem

solving, that lead to a child's autonomy. According to Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, autonomy is reached through a zone of proximal development, or "a range of tasks that the child cannot yet handle alone, but can accomplish with the help of adults" (Berk, 1994, p. 30). Through supportive guidance from adults that creates a scaffold for learning, children are able to develop skills that lead to autonomy (Berk, 1994). During the early childhood years, this scaffolding is primarily established through play interactions, since play is a child's natural inclination.

The emotional burdens placed on young children living in high stress environments such as a homeless shelter significantly impacts their social emotional development and impedes their ability to reach autonomy. Common psychological challenges faced by homeless children include feelings of inferiority, low self-esteem, short attention spans, hostility, and mistrust of authority figures (Shane, 1996). During her observational analysis of homeless children in early childhood centers (1988), Janice Molnar witnessed many of these behaviors firsthand. One of the children, Laticia, was observed as having a significant emotional decline over the course of the six months of observation.

When we first met Laticia, she was a happy, talkative child...Changes in Laticia's behaviors became subtle at first, e.g., more thumb sucking. Things changed dramatically after Laticia's mother fell ill one weekend and required hospitalization...Upon Laticia's return to day care she would suck her thumb all day...Yet she still showed interest in day care activities and could be affectionate, even cheery. The weeks passed and Laticia's mother did not enroll in the drug program. Laticia became quiet and more withdrawn; no more smiles or hugs. She became more passive...Her expression was somber, her mood subdued (pp. 85-86).

As illustrated by Laticia's plight, a contributing cause of the children's negative psychological social responses is instability within their environment. Never experiencing the security of a stable family and place of residency produces a heightened sense of fright and paranoia, as the children are constantly on alert and forced to cope with

emotionally damaging situations (Shane, 1996). These children also experience feelings of being emotionally unsafe and as a result become “unwilling to tackle new experiences and trust unknown people and places” (Shane, 1996, p. 31). Due to these behavioral responses, homeless children have been pronounced as “candidates for difficult or tragic personal lives and further social dislocation” (Shane, 1996, p. 27).

### **Physical Development**

Lack of physical activity is another contributing factor to the potential developmental delays experienced by children living in homeless shelters. Opportunities for physical activity are essential to a young child’s development, as it allows them to practice gross motor skills by strengthening muscles and gaining body awareness. Additionally, extended physical activity promotes healthy living habits that reduce chances of childhood obesity (Sutterby & Thronton, 2005). Exposure to physical structures often found on the playground, such as slides and climbing apparatuses, also encourages young children to explore the capabilities of their bodies while problem solving and taking risks (Sutterby & Thronton, 2005). In the Handbook of Research on the Education of Young Children, David Gallahue states:

To deny children the opportunity to reap the many benefits of regular, vigorous physical activity is to deny them the opportunity to experience the joy of efficient movement, the health effects of movement, and a lifetime as confident, competent movers.

Unfortunately, children living in homeless shelters are often denied the benefits of regular, physical activity advocated by Gallahue, as they spend the majority of their time in a small room with limited physical interaction (Molnar, 1988). While conducting behavioral research at multiple early childhood centers targeted to homeless youth, Molnar (1988) noted “immature large motor behavior- especially evident in a clumsy



stride and awkwardness when running” (p. 78)) as one of the most significant behaviors. Molnar attributes these awkward gross motor movements to the fact that as infants and toddlers, these children were often either held or confined in a stroller to be protected from their hazardous living conditions, which were found to include elevated lead levels, overcrowded sleeping quarters, and poorly maintained shelter environments that created breeding grounds for numerous infectious diseases (Molnar et al 1991). Based on Molnar’s findings, it is not a surprise that when given the opportunity for prolonged physical activity in their preschool classroom, the children relished the chance to run around freely without physical confinement (Molnar et al 1991).

To end the cycle of poverty and homelessness, homeless youth must be provided access to educational resources, particularly at the early childhood age where critical stages of social, cognitive, and physical development take place. Upon completion of her study, Molnar (1988) concluded:

Child-targeted programs, *alone*, are not enough when a family is in need of intensive intervention. Parents need support and nurturing [and] we did not see that important piece developed adequately in any of the programs we visited (p.86).

### **Museums as a Third Place**

Where can families living in homeless shelters go to receive educational resources for their children, in addition to benefitting from the supportive and nurturing intervention of which Molnar speaks so passionately? While institutions such as schools, counseling centers, and government-run agencies may seem like the most readily available options, another powerful resource in the field of educational outreach lies in museums. Acting as a “third place,” defined by Ray Oldenburg, an urban sociologist from Florida, as “the public places on neutral ground where people can gather and

interact” (Cuadra, 2012) museums differ from “first places” (home) and “second places” (work/school). Oldenburg found that museums:

allow people to put aside their concerns and simply enjoy the company and conversation around them. Third places host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work (Cuadra, 2012).

Having a third space directly speaks to the needs of at-risk populations including the homeless, as such places provide an alternative facility removed from the cause of their economic distress. This new space can also offer the sense of safety and structure missing from the shelter residents’ current living situations, and serve as a resource which enables their children to meet developmental benchmarks.

In acting as a third space, one of museums’ many distinct characteristics is that they provide visitors with unique cultural experiences that excite the mind. Granting young children access to enriching learning experiences strengthens their critical thinking skills and allows them to explore new possibilities in their ever-evolving world. Given the significant impact museums can have on a child’s development, it seems that every child should have such experiences. However, just as children with a higher socioeconomic background are granted greater access to language and books, the same children are more likely to be given the opportunity to visit a cultural instruction, whether through a class field trip or an outing with a family member (Hill, 2012). Previous evaluations regarding urban outreach in museum settings confirm that “museums in the U.S. (and elsewhere) attract mostly middle-to-upper- class, well-educated audiences (Storksdiel, 2005). While the cost of admissions is certainly a contributing factor to this socioeconomic divide, the struggle for basic survival makes it increasingly difficult for homeless and poor parents to find time to attend museums and other cultural intuitions

(Hill, 2012). Furthermore, while museums and other resources that act as a third space create value within the larger context of the community, the total benefit within the community context might not be well known to individuals who lack museum exposure (Storksdiel, 2005). Therefore, since families in poverty do not possess the resources to seek out museum opportunities that could benefit their family, in order to make an impact, museums must reach out to the populations they wish to serve and create tangible and personal benefits within their outreach efforts (Storksdiel, 2005).

### **Practicing Intuitions/Organizations**

The Habitot Children's Museum in Berkley, California's mission to "help the broad community of parents and caregivers raise curious, creative and confident children," (Habitot Children's Museum, 2003-2014) is reflected in the numerous opportunities it provides for all populations, including homeless families. The Museum's program "At Home at Habitot" brings families from local homeless shelters, such as Women's Daytime Drop in Center, Berkeley Food and Housing Project, and Matilda Cleveland Transitional Housing, to the Museum for regular visits. In utilizing the Museum's interactive exhibits, solely focused on early childhood development, this program allows for children and their families to develop relationships centered around play, an essential component to a child's development that is often missing from the lives of children living in a shelter (Habitot Children's Museum, 2003-2014). A participant in the program noted the positive impact such programs have on the lives of shelter residents by stating that while being an underemployed single mother brings a tremendous amount of stress and struggles, "having a day sponsored for us has renewed my son's and my spirit and given us joy" (Habitot Children's Museum, 2003-2014).

The feelings of happiness and hope expressed by this mother aren't the only benefit that participating families receive from the program. In addition to the children's time spent in the Museum's exhibits developing social, emotional, cognitive, and gross motor skills, parents are given resources and hands-on experience supporting their child in a safe, enriching, and playful learning environment. This component of the program speaks to the Habitot Children's Museum's goal of increasing parent awareness of the importance of early childhood education. In providing parents with the necessary resources, Habitot hopes to encourage successful parenting and enhance parent-child bonding and family wellbeing to enable children in vulnerable populations to reach their full potential (Habitot Children's Museum, 2003-2014).

Acknowledging the museum's ability to impact the lives of the youngest learners, Cool Culture, a non-profit organization partnered with more than 90 museums throughout the five boroughs of New York City, strives to ensure that "New York's most diverse families with preschool-aged children have access to arts and culture as a way to increase literacy and learning in early childhood and to prepare children to succeed in school" (Cool Culture: About Us). Through their Family Pass Program, families in New York City Title I public schools are provided with a Cool Culture Family Pass, granting free admission to any of the 90+ cultural institutions within New York that are affiliated with this program. To ease uncertainties and unfamiliarity with museums often experienced by low-income families, Cool Culture has developed hunt cards that suggest activities families can incorporate into their museum visit. One card intended for any museum visit suggests "with your child, tell a story about what he or she sees. What are the characters in the painting doing or feeling? What do you think will happen next?" Another card,

specific to the Guggenheim Museum asks visitors to describe the structure of the building. Family events at a wide range of participating museums also allow participants of the program to become acquainted with the environment of museums and further educate parents about the positive impact museum-going can have on their children's overall development and success.

St. Lawrence Place, a shelter for homeless families in Columbia, South Carolina, strives to end the cycle of poverty by educating and exposing their youth to "things of value to the middle and wealthy classes" (Hill, 2012). In achieving this goal, St. Lawrence's afterschool and summer camp programs are designed for the 60 children that can live at the shelter at any time. The program incorporates various cultural activities, including an Art Camp at Columbia Museum of Art and trips to the SC State Museum, EdVenture Children's Museum, Riverbanks Zoo, and to the Richland County Public Library for a range of poetry and theatrical events. By recognizing the significant impact cultural experiences can have on a child's development, St. Lawrence Place is taking the necessary measures in helping to break the cycle of generational poverty.

New research from the Child Trends Data Bank suggests "favorable outcomes associated with high levels of arts participation are particularly strong for students from families with social and/or economic disadvantage" (Child Trends Data Bank, 2013). ArtREACH (Reconnecting And Educating Homeless Adolescents through Creativity and Hope), a program for homeless youth developed by the Young at Art Children's Museum in Davis, Florida, responds to these findings by providing an art-inspired after school curriculum intended for children ages five to 15 who are currently living in local homeless shelters. Educators in the program highlight how art can be used to promote

emotional healing, especially when children in the program are dealing with many emotional burdens uncommon to most children their age. Immersing themselves in their art allows the children to take a respite from the stresses of their everyday life and develop a sense of creativity and self-expression in a safe and supportive environment (ArtREACH, 2014).

ArtREACH's curriculum, which is reproduced on their website as a resource for other institutions wishing to implement similar programs, directly responds to the specific needs of homeless children. Providing a snack and time for unstructured play in the form of recess are key elements, as malnourishment and lack of physical activity are common side effects of living in poverty. Similarly, the daily schedule recognizes a need for consistency, particularly among children living in an environment that is often chaotic and unorganized. Because of students' circumstances, educators are encouraged to recognize the struggles their students may be facing, which could range from current or past physical/emotional/sexual abuse, feelings of abandonment, depression, exhaustion, and frustration with academics that causes lack of concentration (ArtREACH, 2014). Similar to the goals of Habitot's "At Home for Habitot", educators at ArtREACH seek to provide children with a safe space that acts as a "creative and hope filled home base" (ArtREACH, 2014).

Each of these organizations/institutions' programs successfully model the impact that museum outreach has when the needs of the target population are not only considered, but are the driving force of the programs' mission. By creating learning opportunities with tangible results that can be internalized by participants, these outreach

organizations are expanding the definition and population of who can benefit from museums.

### III: METHODOLOGY

In order to gain a deeper understanding of how the *Shelter Program* serves the children involved in the program, I utilized interviews with staff members and informal observations.

#### Interviews

Interviews with staff members provided additional insight into the impact the program has on the children and the overall program structure. The four individuals who were interviewed were Leslie, Deputy Director of Education and Guest Services at the Children's Museum of Manhattan and overseer of the *Shelter Program*, Meredith and Sarah, two of the other early childhood educators who spend the duration of the program with the children, and Ms. Rogers, the Family Programs Coordinator at the homeless shelter who accompanies the families every week and stays with the educators and children in the classroom. If the study were to place an additional focus on the mothers, the two resident writers and social worker who lead the mother's breakout journal writing session would also have been included in the interview process.

Since each individual who was interviewed has a different role in the program, questions were catered to their involvement and were as follows:

Program Overseer:

1. What inspired the program? Was it based on a specific need within the community?
2. What internal gains does the Museum make from the Shelter Program?
3. How does the Museum specifically provide resources for the mothers and children?



4. What do you consider when choosing staff for the program, specifically the educators working with the children?
5. Are there any components of the program you find to be particularly successful?

Educators (2):

1. What is your background working with pre-school aged children as well as children from at risk populations?
2. How have you seen the program benefit the children developmentally?
  - Physically?
  - Socially?
  - Language skills?
  - Do specific elements/objects utilized contribute to their development more than others?

Shelter Representative:

1. What is your official role at the shelter?
2. How have you seen the *Shelter Program* benefit the children developmentally?
  - Physically?
  - Socially?
  - Language skills?
3. Are there elements of the Museum program that you incorporate into activities at the shelter?
4. How would you describe your overall experience bringing the mothers and children to the Museum each week?

The interviews of the educators were conducted on the following days:

March 20<sup>th</sup>: Meredith and Sarah (Early Childhood Educators), March 26<sup>th</sup>: Ms. Rogers (Family Programs Coordinator at the Shelter), and March 27<sup>th</sup>: Leslie (Deputy Director of Education and Visitor Services). Each interview was one-on-one and was documented at the time of the interview. I recorded the staff members' answers by taking notes, including verbatim quotes, and then transcribed their responses onto a computer document immediately following the interview. The responses were then coded according to specific categories and trends contributing to the focus of this study.

### **Observations**

Observations of the children provided supportive evidence of their developmental gains throughout the program. Specific attention was placed on the children's interactions with each other, the educators, their mothers, and objects in the classroom. As my primary objective as a museum educator is to supervise and engage the children throughout the entire duration of the program, I acted as a participatory observer. As a participatory observer, I was not able to remove myself from the primary action and therefore recorded all of my observations immediately following the conclusion of each weekly session. Formal weekly observations began when this study officially started on January 7<sup>th</sup>, 2014. However, my involvement with the *Shelter Program* from its start date of October 8<sup>th</sup>, 2013 allowed me to include anecdotal data for the months of October, November, and December of 2013 in this study.

#### IV: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Through observational data accompanied by interviews with staff, this study found that the *Shelter Program for Families in Temporary Housing* at The Children’s Museum of Manhattan fully embraces its mission to “provide innovative learning opportunities that promote the healthy growth and development of children and families across New York City each year.” The *Shelter Program*, whose infrastructure is based on Early Childhood practices and the institutional pedagogy of creating a supportive and nurturing learning environment, directly responds to the developmental needs of children living in temporary housing, specifically in regards to their language, social/emotional, and physical development.

##### **Language/Literacy Development**

Providing participants with access to enhanced literary skills and opportunities is one of the three inter-related goals that form the basis of the *Shelter Program* and is therefore a critical component incorporated into many of the program’s core elements. Books play a central role in enforcing literary skills, as they are utilized during the story portion of Circle Time when both the children and mothers are present in the classroom, can be accessed through the child sized bookshelf, and are distributed to the mothers at the conclusion of each session, for the formation of the mothers’ personal libraries. Providing the families with access to books, both at the Museum and for their own personal use, is a step towards narrowing the literacy divide between middle class and low-income families. As illustrated by the statistical evidence compiled by First Book advocating for the promotion of literacy during the early childhood years, lack of exposure to books prior to age three can significantly impede upon a child’s language

acquisition and success in reading, placing them at a greater risk of academic hardship and eventual drop out from school (First Book, 2013). Based on this data, exposure to literacy, especially among children from under resourced populations, must be implemented prior to the age of three to promote literary success. Even if a child may not physically be able to read or understand the words that are being read to them, simply understanding what a book is will provide them with the essential tools that lead to academic achievement and personal successes.

The availability of books as a major presence in the classroom has had a significant impact on both the children and their mothers. Although none of the children are at the age where they are reading independently, many of the books read during Circle Time elicit smiles and laughter as each page is revealed. One child, age two, showed particular delight in Eric Carle's *Little Cloud*, exhibited by her shocked expression that appeared after each page was turned and the cloud transformed into another form, such as a bunny, or an airplane (observation, November 2013). Engagement in stories also inspires interaction and conversation. During the reading of Mo Williams' *The Pigeon Wants a Puppy*, a three year old gave particular insight to the events taking place in the story by responding to the pigeon's desire of getting a piggy back ride from the puppy with the exclamation of "the bird can go on the puppy's back, but then it will fly away!" (observation, January 7, 2014).

Sarah, the educator primarily responsible for leading Circle Time, attributes the children's engagement in the stories to the entertaining value of the books she chooses, as well as her delivery, which is usually full of dramatics, song, or a combination of both. "Children respond to song, especially the little ones. Music and stories are the best ways

to connect to young children,” she said (personal communication, March 20, 2014).

Sarah also never says no to requests. “If a child is showing interest in reading, I will always grant them their wish” (personal communication, March 20, 2014).

It is often difficult for the children under the age of two to sit still during Circle Time, as they tend to wander around the room or head straight for the slide. However, when we are alone in the classroom for free play activities, there have been numerous instances in which a child took a book off the shelf and brought it over to an educator. One day I spent five minutes with a one and a half year old who just wanted me to turn the pages of a Pete the Cat book so that he could point to all of Pete’s buttons and smile (observation, December, 2013). About two months later the same child, this time accompanied by another boy about his age, brought over the same book and the two spent several minutes just turning the pages (observation, February 4, 2014). One of the first steps on the path towards reading is becoming acquainted with the structure of a book, by turning the pages or responding to the pictures just as these children did.

The mothers have also had an extremely positive response to receiving a book at the end of each session and participating in story time with their children. During the early months of the program, when there was a select group of recurring attendees, the mothers would always come into the room anticipating a new book. One mother even requested to have the entire Dr. Seuss collection to read to her son when he gets older (observation, October, 2013). That same mother also knew every book that had been read during previous weeks and was not afraid to comment when Sarah pulled out a book that had already been read (observation, October, 2013). Mothers who missed one program session have also frequently returned requesting the book that was given out during the

week that they missed. This persistence in obtaining literary resources for their children shows the mothers' commitment to the program and desire to take advantage of the provided resources.

In addition to having books readily accessible for the children, all of the educators, including myself, make a conscious decision to speak to the children as much as possible in order to expose them to the power of words and strengthen their vocabulary. We recognize the implications of Hart and Risley's study depicting the 32 million word gap between upper-middle class and low-income children and respond to this need by talking to the children in any way that we can. When interacting with eight-month-old "J", Sarah holds him while walking around the room and talks to him about anything he could possibly notice. "Look at the circle, the block is green. Look out the window and see all the trees. There are cars parked in the street. Mommy is doing an art project" (observation, March, 4, 2014). Sarah describes these interactions as being essential to "J"'s development.

This is how children learn. All "J" does is look around to see what's going on and I make it a point to tell him some of the things he sees. If you're not spoken to, you won't know how to speak (personal communication, March 20, 2014).

In speaking towards the impact this form of language modeling has had on the mothers and children, Ms. Rogers noted:

The mothers see how it is folded in to conversations with the children. It is showing them that you can talk to the child and the child understands you, even if they can't speak yet. And the children are gaining confidence to say what they want and ask questions (personal communication, March 26, 2014).

### **Social/Emotional Development**

One of the most influential aspects of the *Shelter Program* on the children's social and emotional development is the consistency and structure of the activities. As discussed

in the literature regarding the emotional needs of children living in temporary housing, children from these circumstances are often immersed in unstable environments. As a result, children experience feelings of intense emotional distress, low self-esteem, short attention spans, hostility, and mistrust of authority figures (Shane, 1996). Consistency and structure provide the children with an emotional stability that allows them to feel safe within the space and at ease with their surroundings. From the Hello Song that begins each session, to a five minute warning followed by cleaning the art table while singing with sponges, the children know what to expect, which is critical. One child who has responded particularly well to this consistency is “E”, a child who has been identified as having autism. Sarah recalls the first day that “E” came into the room and “immediately went into hysterics because he didn’t know what was going on and was over-stimulated. Now that he knows what to expect, he is much calmer” (personal communication, March 20, 2014). While having structure is important for all children, it is especially pertinent for children living in temporary housing such as “E”, as it prepares them for what is to come next and creates a sense of emotional security and trust that is often lacking from their home environment.

Modeling positive and developmentally appropriate parenting skills is another one of the three inter-related goals that form the basis of the *Shelter Program*. Educators follow the behavior management model of CMOM’s early childhood classes, which encourages positive reinforcement and attention to language when correcting undesired behavior. Meredith spoke to this model by describing her approach to handling behavior problems in a positive way.

I am very careful with language and modeling reactions to behavior management, such as throwing, which allows the children to feel safe...When giving directions

the words we use place the emphasis on everybody. Rather than placing the blame on one person, we say, “we all go up the stairs instead of climbing the slide.” (personal communication, March 20, 2014).

All of the educators also understand the importance of patience when dealing with behavior management. In November we had a three year old who had particular difficulty following directions and insisted on climbing up the slide despite repeated instruction stating that was an unsafe and inappropriate way to play on the slide. Instead of constantly reprimanding the child, Meredith chose to explain to him that going up the stairs was a better choice than going up the slide, an approach to discipline that she found to be effective with children in the public schools where she worked prior to CMOM. By continuing to remind the child to make a better choice each time he appeared to do something undesirable, Meredith was able to have the child think of how his actions affect his behavior until he eventually ceased climbing up the slide and used the stairs instead (observation, November, 2013).

The program recognizes that many of the participating mothers have been victims of physical and verbal abuse, which can translate to their approach towards parenting. As a result, specific emphasis is placed on helping the mothers uncover ways to effectively resolve problems, enact discipline, and engage socially using non-violent means. Having the mothers in the room while the educators are supervising the children allows the mothers to witness models of positive behavior enforcement, with hopes that they will implement the model on their own. Ms. Rogers confirmed how the modeling of positive behavior reinforcement resonates with the mothers by stating that “the positive interactions the teachers have with the kids shows [the mothers] to be more patient and handle difficult situations while gaining confidence in their parenting skills” (personal



communication, March 26, 2014). She also spoke about how she has observed the mothers incorporating elements of the program, such as singing during transitions and getting the children to help with clean up, into their daily routines (personal communication, March 26, 2014). The fact that the mothers are actively using parenting strategies learned in the *Shelter Program* further illustrates how the design of the program achieves its mission to model positive and developmentally appropriate parenting skills that can empower the women to be confident and successful mothers.

The *Shelter Program* is designed to enable the children to interact with peers of similar age, which provides multiple opportunities for social engagement. As described by Ms. Rogers, “most of the time the children aren’t around other children at the shelter because the mothers want to keep the children away because of sickness or drama” (personal communication, March 26, 2014). Responding to this need for social interaction, children in the *Shelter Program* are surrounded by educators who are prepared to provide social cues that reinforce skills such as sharing and turn taking. For example, one day three children, all of whom were approximately two years old, tried to go up the first landing of the stairs at the same time. Unaware of each other’s bodies, they trampled on top of each other until I physically removed the smallest child. As the children continued their attempt to ascend the stairs simultaneously, I had them take turns by waiting at the landing until the person in front of them made it to the top (observation, March 11, 2014). In this example, the children were navigating social relationships through the physical space. Since they did not have the developmental capacity to understand how they were not the only one trying to get up the stairs, I intervened to help them adjust their behavior to accommodate the other children wanting to get up the stairs.

Interactions such as these provide the children with the necessary experiences that prepare them for the social interactions they will encounter throughout their lives.

### **Physical Development**

The physical space of the PlayWorks classroom has proven to be a significant asset in the children's development. The arrangement of the objects provides multiple opportunities for physical activity, including two flights of stairs that lead to the slide, a kitchen area for standing and ample space to crawl or walk around. The room allows its youngest inhabitants to navigate throughout the space freely and safely, under the watchful eyes of experienced educators.

When reflecting on the physical development of the children, Sarah's face lights up as she thinks of "C", a one and a half year old who has had remarkable physical growth during her two months in the program.

The first day she looked to the educators to help her up and down the first landing of stairs and would barely move unless we were by her side to help her down. Now, she can do it all by herself- and found a way to go down [by scooting on her bottom]" (personal communication, March 20, 2014).

The slide and adjacent landings of stairs leading up to it have proven to be the primary source for physical development, as climbing stairs, especially those that are steeper than the length of the children's legs, is a significant milestone for children under the age of three. As Meredith observed:

The stairs and slide are something the children fear at first because it looks exciting, but also intimidating. So many children go from crawling up the stairs to walking up by themselves, and then eventually going down the slide when they feel ready. There have been times when kids will go up the stairs and then back down for a good twenty minutes before eventually going down the slide. They're testing it out and then telling themselves they're ready to go down the slide (personal communication, March 20, 2014).

This depiction of the children's interactions with the stairs and slide shows how the climbing structure provides both physical and emotional challenges that the children have been able to overcome through persistence, risk taking and problem solving strategies, all of which contribute to their overall development.

Ms. Rogers noted the environment was "like an obstacle course built for child development" (personal communication, March 26, 2014). She further elaborated on the importance of providing such a space to children living in shelters by commenting on the lack of physical activity these children are receiving at the shelter.

Most of the time the kids and the mothers are in their room at the shelter locked up and don't use outside resources. That is because the mothers have emotional and traumatic issues that make them stay in the room and the children suffer. A one year old wants to reach for things and learn to walk, but a lot of the kids just sit all day and don't get a chance to walk. Some of them barely crawl (personal communication, March 26, 2014).

This description of the conditions at the shelter echoes Molnar's findings regarding the shortage of opportunities for physical activity among children living in temporary housing. Given that Molnar's findings were reported nearly 30 years ago, limited exposure to physical activity is clearly still a major problem among children living in temporary housing. Therefore, programs that promote physical activity among homeless children are imperative in strengthening the children's fine and gross motor skills in addition to boosting their confidence and ability to take risks.

## **V: RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on my findings, the following recommendations would contribute to the future development and success of *The Shelter Program for Families in Temporary Housing*, particularly emphasizing the resources that the Children's Museum of Manhattan provides for the mothers and children participating in the program.

### **Promotion of Free Membership Through Access to Exhibit Spaces**

The free yearly membership given to the mothers upon their entrance to the *Shelter Program* is an invaluable resource that makes the families become a part of CMOM's community and encourages them to further utilize the many resources the Museum has to offer. While Sarah, who has been an educator with the program for the past nine years, expressed that the mothers from last year came to the Museum outside of their time spent with the *Shelter Program* – and still come (personal correspondence, March 20, 2014), based on my interactions with the mothers this year, it is unclear as to whether or not they are using their membership. Furthermore, Ms. Rogers responded with “I'm not sure” (Personal Correspondence, March 26, 2014) when asked if she was aware of the mothers using their membership.

In order to promote use of the membership, I suggest that the exhibit spaces, particularly PlayWorks, directly adjacent to the PlayWorks classroom, be more heavily utilized. Leslie emphasized the significance of the memberships by stating, “We want to show the members that the Museum is for them” (personal correspondence, March 27, 2014). CMOM should designate a time for the mothers to spend in the exhibits with their children and educators, as allowing the mothers to become better acquainted with the

Museum setting would make visits to the Museum outside of the *Shelter Program* less intimidating.

Program participants are often isolated from the general public in the Museum since the duration of the program is spent either in the PlayWorks classroom or upstairs in the Creativity Lab where everyone has lunch and the mothers stay for their session. This isolation could be the primary cause for a lack of membership use, as the mothers are not given the opportunity to envision themselves as members of the Museum community. Therefore, I highly recommend that educators make a conscious effort to expose the children and mothers to opportunities at the Museum beyond the walls of the PlayWorks classroom.

### **Utilization of Other Resources**

Another goal Leslie expressed was that the program acts to enable mothers to use other museums and cultural institutions throughout the city, so they are not so isolated (personal correspondence, March 27, 2014). Since CMOM is listed as one of the many museums in New York City that welcomes families with a Cool Culture Family Pass, I wonder if mothers of eligible children would be able to receive a Cool Culture Pass, thus granting them access to multiple learning opportunities throughout New York City, including museums, libraries, and zoos, that would contribute to their lifelong learning and academic success.

Additionally, since literacy is an integral component of the *Shelter Program*, I recommend that CMOM take advantage of the opportunities for purchasing discount books provided by First Book, a nonprofit organization that provides new books to under-

resourced children, to address the need for access to books. Information regarding registration can be found at <http://booksforkids.firstbook.org/register/>

### **Mothers' Involvement in Future Program Ideas**

Including the mothers in future programming ideas would make them feel further invested in the program's development. Additionally, gaining input from the mothers regarding elements that they find to be particularly successful and those they would like to see more of would provide the staff with a valuable assessment as program curriculum and projects are continuously developed. This information could be gathered at a designated time during the women's "breakout session" at the conclusion of the first term in January and during one of the last sessions in June.

## VI: CONCLUSION

Through my own immersion in the program's organizational structure and conversations regarding developmental rationale from staff members, it is apparent that each element that comprises the *Shelter Program* contributes to achieving the Museum's goal of serving the mothers and children who walk through the doors every Tuesday. The developmental benefits children participating in the *Shelter Program* receive are all due to strategic implementation developed by invested professionals working to strengthen the lives of all program participants. By embracing CMOM's mission of reaching out to families who might not otherwise be able to benefit from the museum's services, staff members have created a "third space" where mothers and children feel safe and welcomed. As the program continues to develop, it is hoped that the relationship between the Museum and the mothers and children of the shelter will continue to flourish as they work together in expanding the definition of a "typical" museum visitor.

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## VIII: APPENDIX

### Observations

*October, November, and December 2013*

- Mid November: mothers bring their own songs to sing during Circle Time (Green Grass Grows All Around, Barney, Dora the Explorer, Spongebob (kid suggested))
- Mother asks educator a song to sing when children fall down to reassure them that they're ok
- Children understanding safety while climbing up/ going down the slide
  - following directions/rules/taking turns
  - Child age 4 asks me what the words on the slide are, I tell her they say that a grown up must be watching the children on the slide to make sure they are safe
- Children exhibit joy/sense of accomplishment when playing
  - clapping when going down the slide/ putting a shape in the shape sorter
- Encouraged imaginative play (kitchen, play dough, baby dolls)
- Older children interact with the public in the exhibits
  - 4 year old acts as the fire chief and directs other children to where the fire is and how to put it out
- One mother wants the entire Dr. Seuss collection and uses the books she gets to read to her son
- 1 and a half year old continues to point to the bottom of the tube that the balls roll down, remembering that is where they come down (cause and effect)
- 1<sup>st</sup> day children run around the room during story time and director of program assures the mothers that is ok and acceptable behavior
  - When this happens, educators follow the children and try to bring them back to the group, or let them play
- Child reacts to the story "Little Cloud" with a shocked expression on her face at the reveal of every different cloud formation (bunny, airplane etc)
- Mother insists on reading a book after the head educator suggests skipping over story time on a day of a holiday party (need for consistency/ enjoyment in book readings)
- Repeating mothers know what books have been read already (shows investment in reading time)
- Child does reenactment of 5 Little Monkeys Jumping on the Bed and paraphrases the song while educators and other children use drums
- Head educator turns the stories into songs when reading to keep the children engaged
- Younger child remembers to squeeze the sponge and often squeezes before the part in the song that instructs to
- Educator asks "what does a frog say?" "Woof?" "No." "Neigh?" "No." "Ribbit?" "No." "No? Then what does it say?" "Plop plop, I'm in the water!"
- Very active child who often gets violent when he doesn't get his way finds enjoyment in caring for the dolls
  - Takes them down the slide, has the patience to help an educator put clothes on them, puts them in the high chair and feeds them

- Also “baby watches” out the window and looks for babies outside by pointing out strollers
- Child who has trouble listening to directions about not climbing up the slide, insists on climbing after repeated correction. Responds to educator telling him to make a good choice and use the stairs. He is then constantly reminded to make a better choice and use the stairs instead of climbing up the slide.

*January 7, 2014*

- One child returns after weeks not at the program and remembers his favorite books (Ahhhh! Spider!, Pete the Cat, 5 Little Monkeys Jumping on the Bed)
- Child pretends to be animals around the room (dog, frog, horse) and uses the crown that his mom made him as a “magic king crown” that he puts on his head that turns him into a different animal. He also puts the crown on educators’ heads as they pretend to be different animals
- During pizza time, one child sees the cut out sun decoration in the room and says it’s like in a show (scenery). He then says he wants to be in a show and when I ask him what show he wants to be in, he says the Big Bad Wolf in Little Red Riding Hood
- Mother says her son will be afraid of going down the slide because he is afraid of heights, but the boy goes up and down the slide just fun and does it numerous times during break out time with the educators
- One child gets very frustrated when another child wants to play with the shape sorter so he punches the ground and goes to play with something else
- Child “makes a pizza” and gives a piece to everyone in the room, including the adults and kids
- Child comes in and hugs all the educators
- Children give commentary during story time (The Pigeon Wants a Puppy)- in response to the pigeon giving the puppy a piggy-back ride “the bird can go on the puppy’s back, but then it could fly away!”

*January 21, 2014*

- Educator brings out smaller drums that the children enjoy beating on with their hands. When the educator brings out a larger drum, the girl (1 yr old) sits on top of it and beats the drum in the open space. She then starts bouncing on top of it, as if dancing.
- Boy reaches out to girl and kisses her cheek. Girl pushes away.
- Girl climbs up first 2 stairs up to the slide but needs educator’s hands to hold on to when coming down.
- Children wait patiently while educator prepares bubbles. They rush to the bubbles to pop them and then wait again for the educator to get the bubble solution on the wand

*January 28, 2014*

- Girl age 1 climbing up the stairs to the slide, she gets up the first flight of 2 stairs and turns around to come back down, reaches out her hand for educator’s help

- Boy age 2 climbs up first stair, reaches out for hands of educator and jumps down (same child who mastered climbing up and down the stairs to the slide his first day and goes up and down the stairs/slide numerous times a session). On this day he uses the stairs for jumping instead of paying attention during story time.
- Boy age 2 puts kaleidoscope block up to his eye to see the color, as he has been shown, and then hands it to me to do the same. He smiles as I put it up to my eye. I put 2 yellow triangles up to my eyes and he finds another triangle and does the same while smiling (mimicry)

*February 4, 2014*

- Child age 1 puts 2 letter blocks in her hands and crawls over to the art table, moving one hand with a block at a time. A mother at the table notices that one of the blocks is the letter “X” and find a foam letter “X” from the art project to show the child and says “Here is another X.”
- Child is stacking letter blocks and an educator counts the blocks every time he builds. When they fall down, she instructs him to build again and try to make it taller than the last time.
- Child sits in the mail truck in the room we have lunch in and pats the seat next to him, showing he wants me to sit down next to him
- The two boys (both age 2) leave the circle during group story time to climb up the stairs and down the slide
- During child break out time, the 2 boys bring over the Pete the Cat book. As the educator begins to read it to them, they turn the pages, not listening to the words. Eventually the educator just shows them the pictures, careful they don’t tear the book.
- While playing with play dough, one child puts his play dough in a toy pot from the kitchen area. Other children at the table start grabbing for the pot so educators bring out other bowls for them. The boy starts grabbing at the other bowls so he is moved to another side of the table. The play dough is put away when too much ends up on the floor or in the children’s mouth.
- And educator sits with a 1 year old girl as she puts shapes in the shape sorter, moving the shapes around until one goes in

*February 11, 2014*

- New child (almost 2 years) has never been separated from her mom. She stays by her mom’s side upon entering the room. She goes up the stairs with an educator but won’t go up the slide. She turns around to go down the stairs, but needs help going down
- New child cries and screams during circle time when her mother leaves to go to the bathroom without telling her
- 3 children (all around age 2) go up the stairs to the slide at the same time. Not aware of each other’s bodies, they trample on top of each other until an educator has to physically move the smallest child (navigating social relationships through physical space)
- Young girl (age 1) is still exploring going up the stairs on her own. She will do it occasionally, but often looks to an educator for help

- Girl age 1 sits on educator's lap and looks at books Educator picks up a book and she pushes it away. Educator points to the shape sorter and asks "is that what you want?" Girl nods. (communicating needs/wants)
- 2 boys work together to move a chair across the room. They turn it over and laugh together. When they start to climb on it and it becomes unsafe, an educator removes the chair. The boys find another chair and do the same thing. When all the chairs have been stacked so they can't get them, they climb on the table until the table is put up. They run around the room throwing things and laughing. An educator brings out drums and they play with them (developing social relationships/ testing boundaries)

#### *February 25, 2014*

- 3 year old boy comes into the room crying, stays by his mom's side and refuses all attempts to engage with the toys in the room. Mom takes him out of the room to calm him down and comes back 5 minutes later. He appears to have calmed down, but continues to cry a few minutes later. Mom has him sit at the craft table and tells him that when he is ready to stop crying, she will play with him, but is going to ignore him if he keeps crying. A few minutes later he stops crying and goes over to the blocks with his mom. They stay at the blocks together making towers.
- After lunch educators are unsure of the boy will be able to separate from his mom, but give it a try. The boy is told that we are going back to the room to play with the blocks he was having fun with. He takes an educators hand and has no problem separating. When back in the room he goes straight to the blocks and starts making towers.
- 2 yr old boy enters the room with his mom and doesn't want to play with anything that is presented to him, appearing to be very overwhelmed. I ask his mom what he likes and she says music. I give him a drum and the mom asks for a stick so that he can beat it so I give him a popsicle stick, which he uses to hit the drum slowly.
- 11 month old girl is just learning to walk so she holds on to everything in sight, including people's legs, chairs, the bookcase and the toy high chair for support. She uses the bookcase to stand by herself and lifts her feet as if trying to climb the bookcase.
- 3 year old boy has little verbal speech. His mother points this out and says she is concerned and looking in to it. (possible cause of his initial frustrations)
- When coming back to the room after lunch, the 2 year old boy's mom comes back to the room with him, afraid he won't be able to separate. Educators assure her that we will help him, and it will be ok. We bring out the big drum and the boys start banging on it as we sing songs to distract the child as the mother leaves. The boy shows no acknowledgement that his mother has left. The children play with the drum for the next 20 minutes as educators sing songs.

#### *March 4, 2014*

- 3 year old boy who came in crying last week comes in and goes straight for the blocks. After building a few towers, he goes over to the art table where his mom is

making a crown. He picks up the glue stick and brushes it across the table. I show him how to take the top off and roll it up to get the glue to come out and he goes “whoooooa!” He puts the top back on the glue, takes it off again and says “whoooooa!” He continues to explore the glue, making sporadic exclamations of “whoooooa!” His mom shows him how to properly use the glue, but he seems to be more interested in stacking them on top of each other and taking off the cap.

- I show 1 year old girl the color shakers (“shake it shake it shake it till the colors mix!”). I hand it to the girl, who shakes it up and down and then sideways. I pick up another color mixer to shake with her and she reaches out to hand me hers. We trade back and forth a few times until she walks away to do something else.
- Sarah holds 8 month old while walking around the room and talks to him about what he is seeing “Look at the circle, the block is green. Look out the window and see all the trees. There are cars parked in the street. Mommy is doing an art project.”

## Interviews

*1) Educator: Sarah (March 20, 2014)*

***What is your background working with pre-school aged children as well as children from at risk populations?***

Masters in EC education from NYU- CMOM Jan of 04- School Programs EC classes and shelter, Started shelter in 2005 (9 years)

***How have you seen the program benefit the children developmentally?***

- ***Physically?***

“C”- remarkable growth in 2 months she has been coming to the program. The first day she looked to the educators to help her up the first landing of stairs and now she can do it all by herself- and found a way to go down without help!

- ***Socially?***

The kids are getting a chance to socialize with other kids their own age. I’m not sure how much of that they get at the shelter. I’m assuming there are similar programs, but I just don’t know. It’s also tricky because most of the kids are so young they are still at parallel play, where they will play next to someone, but not necessarily with them. At this young age they don’t play with each other as much, but for the kids that are around the age of 2, you can definitely see that they like playing with each other.

They are learning important social skills like sharing. Sharing is a big thing for little kids. Also taking turns, counting, letters, colors, we teach them it all. Being exposed is enough. And they get that exposure through repetition.

A lot of what we do is related to CMOM’s ECC curriculum- same type of curriculum- kids are getting the same experiences because they should, it’s too bad the shelter kids can only get it once a week.

The program is so successful because it is the same format every week- Hello Song, sponges, transitions- the kids and mothers now what to expect, which is critical. Look at Cameron- when it’s time to clean the table he knows to use the shushing finger when it’s time to stop. And Eshon- the first day he came in hysterics because he didn’t know what was going on and was over stimulated. Now that he knows what to expect, he is so much calmer. These kids probably don’t have routine in their lives, and routine makes them calmer. Children need to know what to expect to prepare them. If children don’t have a steady routine in their lives it causes chaos. The comfort that our consistency brings really shows. The kids feel safe and comfortable because they know what’s going on and what will happen next because we make a very conscious effort to tell them. Rarely do we have kids that cry because they want to go back to their mommy. They cry when they first come in without knowing, but after that, it’s rarely an issue unless something else is going on like they’re sick or emotionally distraught because of outside causes.

- ***Language skills?***

This year the mothers have been fantastic speaking to the kids, and it shows in their interactions, both with the educators and each other. In the past, the mom’s didn’t speak to the kids as much; they would just talk to each other or mutter and grunt to the kids,

which negatively affected the kids' behavior and made them less willing to engage with the educators.

When we speak to the kids, they start picking up the words we use. I talk to them about anything they could possibly notice, "Look at the circle, the block is green etc." To a grown up they're probably thinking "what is that crazy lady saying?" but that is how children learn. Look at "J", he's so young, all he does is look around to see what's going on. And I make it a point to tell him some of the things he sees. If you're not spoken to, you won't know how to speak.

I make story time as dramatic as possible to engage the kids- and they really do pay attention. If I can't get them through dramatic language then I'll sing it. Children respond to song, especially the little ones because it's entertaining. Music and stories are the best ways to connect to young children

When it comes to books, I'll never say no to a child that wants to hear a story. Last week I was going to read Ahhh Spider, but a child picked up 5 Little Monkeys so I said ok, we'll read that one. If a child is showing interest in reading, I will always grant them their wish.

This year all the moms are responding to getting a free book, they're coming not just for the free books, but to build a library- one mom wanted all the Dr. Seuss books.

### **Other thoughts?**

This year has been challenging with Circle Time because there are younger kids that have less of an attention span. Last year having Laura and her guitar was really helpful because the kids stayed engaged and didn't run around to the slide or kitchen area as much.

There has been an apparent growth in the parents as well –there is less swearing and they genuinely are invested in the program. You can see this when they come to Circle Time asking for songs and ways to model behavior when their kid falls down.

The program is as much for kids as it is for parents.

Even though numbers are low, it has been consistent, the same moms and kids come back which is really special, we get to know the kids.

A lot of moms last year came to the Museum with their membership, and still come. I'll see them around the Museum when I'm here and always love saying hello.

We used to go into exhibits with the kids, but don't really as much any more. This year it's been more difficult with the younger ones- I can't imagine taking certain kids out in the public. It's also a really difficult transition to go back to the room after going to the exhibit and we would have to take either everyone or no one. The times this year where we've had a few older kids go out with one educator have been nice, but again, it doesn't happen too frequently.



2) Educator: Meredith (March 20, 2014)

***What is your background working with pre-school aged children as well as children from at risk populations?***

Certified in childhood education and students with disabilities, Public School teacher k-5 for students with special needs in an inner city, had some children living in a shelter, early childhood education for about 4 years, CMOM 2 ½ years with School Programs and ECC

***How have you seen the program benefit the children developmentally?***

- ***Physically?***

It appears that many of the kids that have come to the program are reaching their developmental milestones physically, such as exploring standing up on their own and walking, but I feel like we are providing them the opportunity to practice further developing these abilities. We are giving them the space to do so as well as the support and encouragement they need. They are at their developmental level, but we are giving them more opportunity to explore and develop. The physical space of the room also contributes to their development-they have the room to be open and explore. It has many facets- slide, kitchen to stand, space to crawl. It is a place to practice movements that are necessary. It's also not really restrictive. They have the freedom to move as they wish- as long as it's safe.

The slide provides so many wonderful opportunities for the kids. It is something some children first fear, it looks exciting but also intimidating. I've seen so many children go from crawling up the stairs to walking up the stairs by themselves to going down the slide. I've seen them repetitively go up the stairs and then back down for a good 20 minutes and then eventually go down the slide. They're testing it out. What does it look like from the top? Ok, now I'm ready to go down."

- ***Socially?***

The program provides the kids with a great opportunity to step outside their boundaries and interact with educators that eventually become people they recognize and trust. To be able to interact in age appropriate activities really provides them with and reinforces social skills. I try to support them the most socially and emotionally- I want them to know that they are in a safe place and accepted, they can be whoever they are and that we will guide their behaviors to create appropriate responses. I am very careful with language and modeling reactions to behavior management, such as throwing, which allows the children to feel safe. With the mothers in the room, we try really hard to model how we address age appropriate behaviors that are not desired. When giving directions the words we use place the emphasis on everybody. Rather than placing blame on one person we say, "we all go up the stairs instead of climbing the slide."

*Have mothers been responsive?* Yes and no. Discipline is a very personal for the mothers and because of their backgrounds, history, and the experiences they have gone through they take it upon themselves to discipline their child in the way they feel necessary. We don't really get to interact with those situations- they talk about it with the social worker

upstairs. But if we stick with it there is hope that through repetition they will see the benefits.

There has been a lot of positive interactions with parents. The parents really like to see the educators interact with their children in positive ways. They like hearing what their kids excel at and what is cute and funny because they don't get that often. There is a lot of seriousness in their lives and so having a place to be happy with their children is nice for them

The kids have developed a lot of relationships with each other. Living together helps, but at the Museum they can play with each other through dramatic play that helps them form peer bonds, which are crucial. We can also guide turn taking, using gentle hands and gentle feet, and playing together as a group instead of side by side. The gathering drum comes to mind since that is something the kids love to do together.

- ***Language skills?***

I really like that we give the mothers different handouts with reading tips at the end of each session. It shows them that even though the kids can't read, they can still provide experiences that expose them to literacy.

Books are an integral part of the learning environment. They are able to see the whole world through books. I don't see kids regularly interact with the bookshelf, but when they do we can provide them with a way to become more intrigued with the stories.

When it comes to being conscious of the language I use, I regularly try to point out common vocabulary such as letters, sounds, numbers, and animals. I also use positive language and reinforcement. I try to make their experiences kind with kind words that hopefully someday they will use regularly as well.

- ***Do specific elements/objects utilized contribute to their development more than others?***

The art activity is critical to the group. It allows parents to be creative and share that with their children. It also allows them to do something fun that they can't do regularly. It even motivated one mom to ask where she can do these projects at home.

***Other thoughts?***

It's sad to see the same faces every week because that means they haven't moved out of the shelter, but at the same time, we're establishing a relationship and bond with the kids and their mothers in a safe environment that they obviously are excited to come back to.

I did not know what experience was going to be like or what to expect. I don't know what it's like at the shelter and I want to respect their stories and experiences. I love idea of that no matter what we have been through, we are all here together, playing, singing, talking, eating pizza, and just enjoying each other.

3) *Shelter Representative: Ms. Rogers (March 26, 2014)*

***What is your official role at the shelter?***

Family Programs Coordinator. My role is to motivate the mothers to participate in the enrichment activities we provide. I am building relationships with the mothers and children and showing how I am a resource and that there are outside resources for them that they could benefit from.

***How have you seen the Shelter Program benefit the children developmentally?***

- ***Physically?***

The physical environment of the space is so important. Most of the time the kids and mothers are in their room at the shelter locked up and don't use the outside resources. This is because the mothers have emotional and traumatic issues that make them stay in the room and the children suffer. A 1 year old wants to reach for things and learn to walk but a lot of the kids just sit all day and don't get a chance to walk. Some of them barely crawl. At the Museum they grow confidence to move around to explore new things. It's a new space that they can explore in. Just having the space is so important.

The structure of the room is like an obstacle course for the children, Every element in the room gives them space to develop. Whether it's the slide to go down, stairs to go up, the toys to interact with and see colors, it's all there for them to explore and try new things.

A lot of children just need to run around. There are times I think of other kids at the shelter that I want to bring to the Museum so they can get that experience.

- ***Socially?***

The healthy interactions with the educators are great. The children usually hear no all the time and are getting commands. Here, they're not hearing no. The educators provide them with other options instead of just commands and what they can't do. It's not just black and white. The tone of the educators is great. At the museum they don't hear barking all the time, they hear affection.

It's a great environment because there are trained professionals giving social cues for the children, Most of the time the children aren't around other children. The moms want to keep other children away because of sickness drama etc. At the museum they have opportunities to see other children in a positive way. We're all working together and doing the same thing. They are learning how to share. They also get to see that there are little people just like them, but also kids that are smaller. When a 4 year old sees a baby we show them how to treat them. It's great that we have such an age range (0-4) because the kids learn how to interact with other kids of the same and different ages.

The educators inspire the mothers to be more patient. They can be more silly and children again. Most of them didn't have a chance to have a childhood. They can get that chance through being with their kids. The program shows them that it's ok to have fun with their kids, something they usually don't do while at the shelter. They sing and dance with everyone and really enjoy it.

A lot of the children have special needs. Seeing the positive interaction the teachers have with the kids shows them how to be more patient and handle difficult situations. It gives them more confidence. We don't have to react the same harsh way all the time. They learn so much from you.

Having an opportunity for the moms and kids to separate is also great. The kids need that separation from their mom. You can see the kids get stressed from their moms and the moms get stressed from the kids. But at the museum they can be in a positive environment.

- ***Language skills?***

Learning colors, numbers words. They are learning so many new words by coming to the program and getting exposure to vocabulary. The mothers see how it is folded in to conversations with the children. It is showing them that you can talk to the child and the child understands you, even if they can't speak yet. The Children are getting the confidence to say what they want and are learning manners.

I have definitely noticed the children wanting to ask more questions. When they see me, they are more inclined to ask questions because I am a familiar person in the room, just like the educators are familiar to them at the museum. They want to talk to them and go to them with questions or things to see and play with.

I really notice the confidence for both the moms and the kids. Once the mom has it, it shines with the child and helps with educational and social development. This is something that is out of the mom's comfort zone. But they gain comfort as they gain confidence.

"A" wasn't speaking 3 months ago. He was getting therapy 3 times a day for an hour. 3-4 times a week. It took a while for the department of education to give him services, but they play catch up and it works. (Yesterday) he was on fire. With the letter blocks "Cowboy, vine, horse." He gained the confidence to speak and use words he knows. His mom needs speech therapy, she's not comfortable with speech, but she's intelligent. She said "I have this issue but my child is not going to."

***Are there elements of the Museum program that you incorporate into activities at the shelter?***

Yes! I look at a lot of the toys they play with at the Museum and try to find them for them at the shelter. When I see the children gaining confidence with motor skills, I give them tools such as forks that they can use in their hands to manipulate. I am always looking for specialty educational tools. Oh and books! I find books that suit the children's interests. If a child loves horses, I give them books about horses.

The structure. They use CMOM as a model. Cleaning with sponges- "my child knows how to clean so we're going to do that at home". We try to find ways to help the mothers help their children become independent.

Transitions- singing instructions has been awesome! The moms use it to get the kids to go places. Sitting down and eating. Giving directions. Ways to make it fun for both the mom and the child. Small things like that matter.

***How would you describe your overall experience bringing the mothers and children to the program each week?***

It's wonderful. I love children and the intimacy of children. As mothers they can be overprotective but I knew this program could be a triangle of love. I felt the shelter program would be another experience to provide loving opportunities. Tuesdays are definitely an experience. We sing songs on the bus. It's very intimate. They are very comfortable with me. Having regulars is big. Keeping them engaged is great. Every week you want it to be a positive week. If you want it to be effective they catch it from day one. They see it benefits their child. When you see the regulars it's like yes, I have done my job!

***Do you know if the mothers use their membership?***

I'm not sure.

***4) Program Overseer: Leslie (March 27, 2014)***

***What inspired the program?***

It started with the Department of Community Affairs before my time. 18 years ago the program started as a teen parent program with Brandeis HS. Teachers at the program wanted the teenage mothers to develop parent skills so we worked with the teens to develop literacy. We had educators at the museum and the mothers would come with their new born babies. Then the funding ended and the program at Brandeis stopped, but we wanted to continue so we looked at other NY homeless shelters and partnered with West End. However, we found that many of the women were dealing with domestic violence, drug abuse, and other difficult struggles so we recognized that we needed to expand program for support. This is how the Social Worker became a big part of the program. In addition to the Social Worker, we developed the breakout sessions with the writing component. For this we found two wonderful writers who were flexible to take the model at the museum. This structure allowed class time and separation for both the mothers and the children. The food component also became a central part of the day as it is a time for intimacy and sharing an experience.

***What internal gains does the Museum make from the Shelter Program?***

All of our work is research based. This program is like a lab to test out ideas. When we work with diverse audience we learn and use them as a way to help build programs and exhibits. Alphie (the talking dragon who likes to eat letters) came from work with the shelter program and outreach. A subject like reading is challenging and intimidating, so we used Alphie as a way to make it fun. We use programs like this to help us with our research. A big part of our mission is to reach diverse audiences, such as parents and children that don't have the resources. We want to be a resource to all families.

***How does the museum specifically provide resources to the mothers and children?***

We try to make this program a way to for the mothers to use other museums and institutions throughout the city, such as libraries. We want to provide them with more resources so they're not so isolated. We want them to see that they are not alone. We show them their child can be successful in different ways. If the child can't sit still during Circle Time, it's developmentally appropriate. Another example is discipline. We want to show that using alternative language is an alternative to hitting. We use art activities that promote literacy. We have books and talk to the children as much as possible to promote literacy. Even the simple things lay the foundation for success at school and in life. We want to empower these women.

Membership is also a big resource we provide and we find that they use it quite a bit. Not as much during the week, but on the weekends. Membership is for a year but can renew and many have. If they take the initiative we supply them with that. We want to show the mothers that the museum is for them. Our goal is that the mothers use their membership and be a part of the community. Use CMOM as a lifeline when they are not in intensive environments with resources.

***What do you consider when choosing staff for the program? Specifically the educators working with the children.***

We try to choose the most experienced staff to work with this population. We look and see how folks have done on the floor and with outreach. It is so intensive with one on one work. Educators are not only experienced, but have the passion to work in a high-energy intensive environment. It is a small program but has significant impact. We are making a difference in changing peoples lives and want that to be a main goal of our staff.

***Are there any other components of the program you find to be particularly successful?***

The art project at the beginning of the parent/child session. One of the changes I made when I came on board to this program was no more messy art activities. It made the moms tense because they have few clothes. Now the art is less messy but more geared towards the parent, with product for the kids to enjoy (aprons, hats, name banner, picture frames, teddy bears, piggy banks etc). They can explore art in different ways. Engagement in art helps ease them and develop intimacy and provides a space for them to talk. The kids also have a chance to become engaged with their parents. It is a way to show how they can engage kids in art making. We found that while doing the art activity, the mothers opened up so much. It also allowed the social worker and writer to be involved.

**REQUIRED PERMISSIONS**

I give permission for the Children's Museum of Manhattan to be mentioned by name in Leah Taradash's case study of the *Shelter Program for Families in Temporary Housing*.

Leslie Bushara  
(Leslie Bushara, Deputy Director for Education and Guest Services)

By signing this document, I give permission for Leah Taradash to use my name in her case study of the *Shelter Program for Families in Temporary Housing*.

Leslie Bushara Leslie Bushara

Shaniqua Rogers Ms. Rogers  
(Ms. Rogers)

Meredith Smith Meredith Smith

Sarah Ackerman Sarah Ackerman